Maintenance of air-conditioning vital to prevent Legionnaire’s disease

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Well it looks like summer is finally here and with July promising to be a heat wave, air-conditioning across the country will start to be used that probably hasn't been used in a long time. Care facilities, nursing homes, business offices and other places where people gather will soon be reaching for their air con’s “on” switch. So now is the time to pay attention to air-conditioning systems or units. A few facilities may have already done so, but most probably haven’t. This overhaul and cleaning is essential to help prevent the spreading and contraction of Legionnaires’ disease.

On the whole, Legionnaire’s disease is thought of as being ‘rare’ but in actual fact there were 235 cases in 2011 of Legionnaires’ disease in England and Wales according to figures published by www.hpa.org.uk. The disease affects one or two people in a facility at a time and usually these cases get overlooked and never logged officially. However, Legionnaires’ is still a serious disease with devastating consequences should an outbreak occur.

Legionnaires’ is a bacterium known as Legionella pneumophila. The disease and the bacterium were discovered following an outbreak at an American Legion convention in Philadelphia in 1976, hence the name. Water droplets in the form of an aerosol somehow managed to contaminate the hotel's air conditioning system allowing the bacteria to come into contact with the convention guests.

It is important to note that the disease cannot be passed from person to person and it is a type of pneumonia which usually affects the middle-aged and elderly more severely. As the pneumonia develops there may be chest pain, shortness of breath, abdominal pain, vomiting with accompanying diarrhoea and hallucinations. Therefore it is more important that care and nursing homes get their air conditioning checked, cleaned and maintained sooner rather than later.

Legionnaires’ exists widely throughout natural water systems such as rivers and ponds, but it’s the rise in temperature that’s critical to its growth, and it is in warm or hot water of artificial water systems that it can really thrive. In such conditions it forms into a biofilm, or layer, of living bacteria over artificial structures and surfaces. Cooling systems like air-conditioning are probably the most common cause of distributing the disease. Droplets of water containing the bacteria are spread over a wide area, quickly and easily filling a room with the disease which is inadvertently inhaled by its occupants.

The most annoying thing about the disease is that it’s preventable. The risk of catching Legionnaires' can be reduced with appropriate maintenance and cleaning of possible sources, such as air conditioning systems. So take the time and effort now to ensure the care home and nursing environment remain as disease free as possible.

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